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SUBJECT: KARBALA PREPARES FOR SHABANIYAH

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable.

11. (C) Summary: Seeking to avoid a repeat of the deadly violence that marred last year's Shabaniyah (a Shia observance commemorating the twelfth imam's birth, which this year is on August 17), Karbala officials are tightening security throughout the province. Seven thousand additional police and military personnel will be deployed. Five hundred observation towers and 300 closed-circuit television cameras have been installed to monitor pilgrims. The police commander has announced the arrest of persons intending to disrupt the observance as well as the recovery of weapons and explosives, but we are unable to corroborate these reports. Similarly, the explosion near the al-Abbas shrine on July 25 remains the subject of rumors and conspiracy theories. End Summary.

Never Again

12. (SBU) Karbala officials are tightening security throughout the province in advance of Shabaniyah, commemorating the birth of Imam Mohammad al-Mahdi (on 15th of the Islamic month of Sha'ban, which this year is August 17; rituals will occur throughout the evening of August 16). Shabaniyah is among the most important observances for Shias who adhere to the majority "twelver" strain found in Iraq and, especially, Iran. (Note: Unlike the so-called "fiver" or Zaydi and "severer" or Ismaili Shia variants, the "twelvers" accept the twelfth or "hidden" imam, al-Mahdi, as their spiritual leader. They believe al-Mahdi, who was born in 868 C.E., was hidden from humans by God at the age of five but remains alive and someday will re-appear -- along with Jesus and other prophets -- to usher in an era of peace and righteousness preceding the Day of Judgment. End Note.) Officials here expect upwards of one million pilgrims -- more than half from Iran and over 100,000 from Sadr City -- to flood the province, placing a severe strain on local infrastructure and nerves alike. Our contacts comment that pent-up demand following years of the Saddam regime's repression likely will ensure "oversubscribed" Shabaniyahs and other Shia observances here for years to come.

13. (C) The ramped-up security is intended to avoid a repeat of the violence that marred last year's Shabaniyah. On August 28, 2007, clashes between Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and Badr Corps militias left at least 51 people dead and 247 wounded, prompting provincial authorities to abort the observance and order visitors out of Karbala. Vowing that such violence "never again" will occur here, officials have deployed 7,000 additional police and military personnel around the province -- for a total of some 40,000 -- 2,000 of whom are plain-clothes officers and another 2,000 of whom are women. Two SWAT teams including "hundreds" of snipers will take up positions around the al-Husayn and al-Abbas shrines. Five hundred watchtowers and 300 closed-circuit television cameras have been installed to monitor pilgrims in the holy city. Border checkpoints have been reinforced with 400 recent male and female police academy graduates to search

vehicles and persons entering the province. The Iraqi Air Force reportedly will patrol the skies. Rules for visitors' conduct also have been announced. The shouting of sectarian slogans and the display of posters and pictures are banned, and pilgrims are forbidden to wear white funeral shrouds. Our contacts report that JAM and Badr Corps members, using shrouds to hide weapons, were responsible for sparking last year's melee.

Never Say Never

14. (C) Even as provincial leaders such as Governor Akeel Mahmoud al-Khazali -- recognizing the importance of tourism to the local economy -- are promising a safe and trouble-free Shabaniyah, Karbala police commander MG Ra'ad Shaker Jawdat has announced the arrests of those he says intended to disrupt the observance as well as the seizures of weapons and explosives. Ra'd said a police raid on a Karbala neighborhood on July 9 yielded the arrest of three JAM leaders and the discovery of 20 kilograms of explosives, 25 automatic rifles and ammunition, and communications equipment. On July 19, Ra'ad trumpeted the arrest of Qahtan al-Azawi, leader of the Diyala-based "Battalions of the 1920 Revolution" Sunni terrorist group. According to Ra'ad, al-Azawi had been staying at a hotel in downtown Karbala while posing as a Shia religious figure in order to contact sleeper cells to undertake armed operations during Shabaniyah. On July 22, Ra'ad claimed that the police arrested three persons and seized two tons of TNT at a farm south of the city center.

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15. (C) Note: Although these arrests and seizures sound dramatic and appear significant, well-informed contacts here caution that Ra'ad is not above exaggerating. There is no doubt that Ra'ad is an effective police commander whose strong-arm tactics have done much to bring about the absence of violence that Karbala currently enjoys. However, he also is known to be politically ambitious and has a penchant for putting self-promotion ahead of the truth. For example, his visage -- on posters touting Karbala's "serene" security environment -- is ubiquitous in the province. It is in Ra'ad's interest to hype the threat to Shabaniyah and we expect him to take full credit for any security-related successes that occur during the observance. Absent independent corroboration of Ra'ad's claims, we advise taking much of what he says with a grain of salt. End Note.

July 25 Explosion Unresolved

16. (C) Similarly, the truth about the explosion near the al-Abbas shrine during sunset prayers on Friday, July 25, remains obscured by rumors and conspiracy theories. The facts as we know them are that the gasoline tank of a car traveling some 200 meters from the shrine exploded, injuring eight men and a woman, one of them critically. One popular rumor has it that Provincial Council Acting Chairman Abd al-Al al-Yasiri -- who is believed to detest Ra'ad -- prevailed upon Badr Corps malfeasants to create this and other security incidents, thus demonstrating that the police commander is not in control and should be sacked.

17. (C) A less-likely hypothesis posits that Ra'ad orchestrated the explosion to provide the pretext for a crackdown on his enemies, particularly the Badr Corps. A third school of thought holds that Tehran caused the explosion to justify maintaining control over its citizens' movements to and within Iraq. Businessmen here complain bitterly that sweetheart food-and-lodging package deals negotiated between pro-Tehran Karbala officials and Iran's government tourism agency prevent local hotels and restaurants from making a profit. PRT reports these scenarios only for their insight into local politics.

Witnesses at the scene of the explosion have reported that, because the occupants of the car were injured, the gas tank's eruption may simply have been an accident.

Comment

18. (C) As August 16 approaches, Karabala officials will heighten security precautions and are likely to advance more claims of timely arrests and seizures. The authorities in Karbala, embarrassed by last year's chaos, are taking prudent steps to prevent a recurrence. We are cautiously optimistic that these will prove effective. However, Shabaniyah is a high-profile, perhaps irresistible, target of opportunity for a significant swath of players -- inside and outside of Iraq -- looking to settle scores or advance agendas. End Comment.

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